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Biography of Bill Gates, Co-Founder of Microsoft

He helped create the world's largest PC software company

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By Mary Bellis

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Bill Gates (born Oct. 28, 1955) is the principal co-founder of Microsoft Corp., the world's largest personal-computer software company and one of the largest and most influential technology companies in the world. Since he stepped down as chairman of Microsoft Corp., he has focused on and contributed billions of dollars to several charities, especially the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the world's largest private charitable foundation.

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Fast Facts: Bill Gates

Known For: Co-founder of Microsoft

Also Known As: William Henry Gates III

Born: Oct. 28, 1955 in Seattle, Washington

Parents: William H. Gates Sr., Mary Maxwell

Published Software: MS-DOS

Spouse: Melinda French Gates

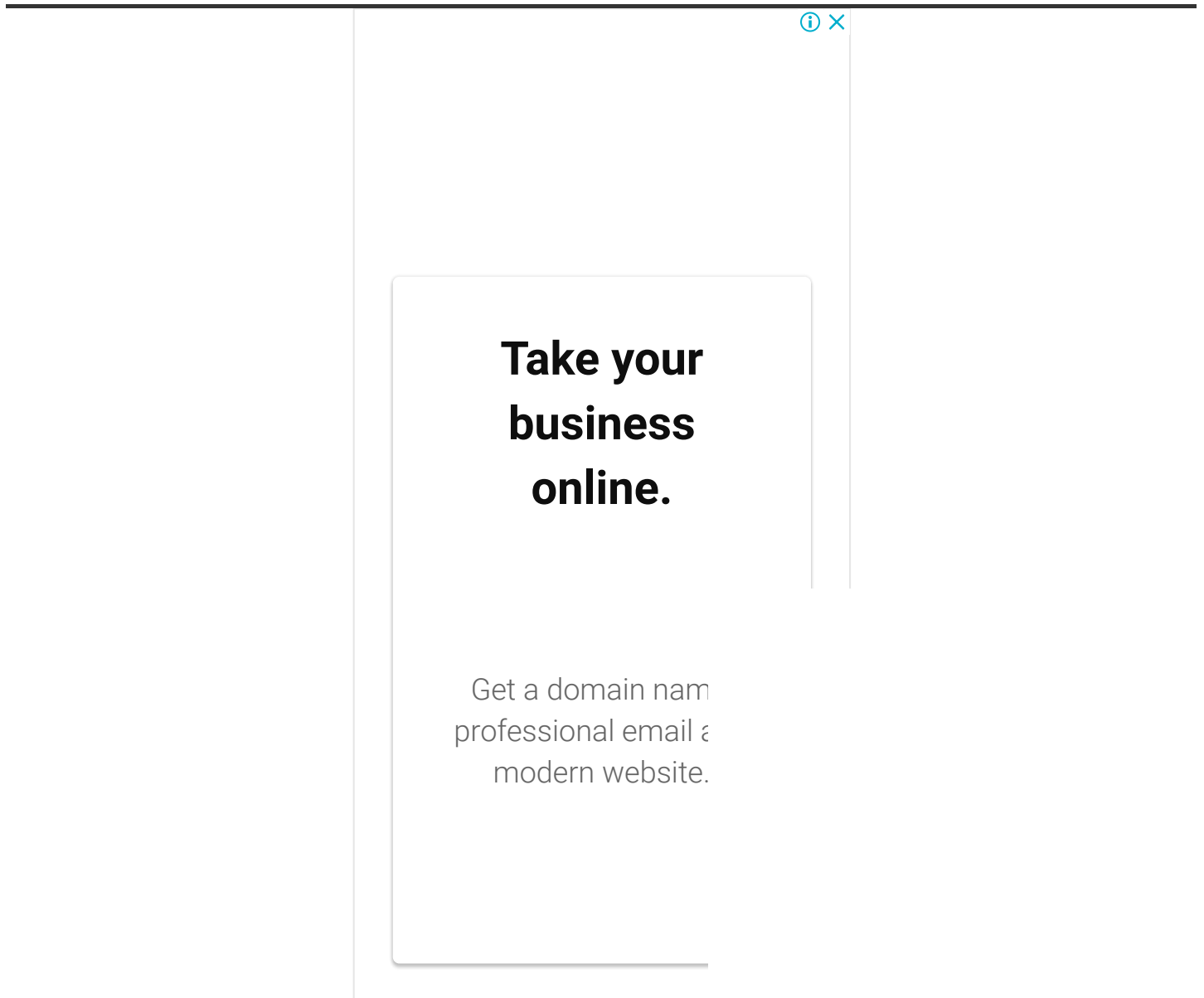
Children: Jennifer, Rory, Phoebe

Notable Quote: "I think it's fair to say that personal computers have become the most empowering tool we've ever created. They're tools of communication, they're tools of creativity, and they can be shaped by their user."

Early Life

Bill Gates (full name: William Henry Gates III) was born on Oct. 28, 1955, in Seattle, Washington, the son of William H. Gates Sr., an attorney, and Mary Maxwell, a businesswoman and bank executive who served on the University of Washington Board of Regents from 1975 to 1993. He has two sisters.

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Gates wrote his first software program at 13 and in high school was part of a group, which also included childhood friend Paul Allen, that computerized their school's payroll system and developed Traf-O-Data, a traffic-counting system that they sold to local governments. Gates and Allen wanted to start their own company immediately, but Gates' parents wanted him to finish high school and go on to college, hoping he eventually would become a lawyer.

In 1975 Gates, then a sophomore at Harvard University in Boston, Massachusetts, joined Allen, who was working as a programmer for Honeywell near Boston, to write software for the first microcomputers, later called PCs. They started by adapting BASIC, a popular programming language for large computers.

Starting Microsoft

With the success of this project, Gates left Harvard during his junior year and, with Allen, moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, planning to develop software for the newly emerging personal computer market. In 1975 they started what Allen named Micro-Soft by combining "micro" from "microcomputers" and "soft" from "software." The hyphen later was dropped. In 1979, they moved the company to Bellevue, Washington, just east of Seattle.



 Bill Gates with Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen. Doug Wilson / Corbis Historical / Getty Images

Microsoft became famous for its computer operating systems and killer business deals. In 1980, Gates and Allen licensed an operating system called MS-DOS to IBM, at the time the world's largest computer maker, for its first microcomputer, the IBM PC. They were smart enough to retain the right to license the operating system to other companies, which eventually made them a fortune.

By 1983, the year Allen left the company for health reasons, Microsoft's reach had become global with offices in Great Britain and Japan and 30% of the world's computers running on its software.

A few years earlier, Gates had developed a partnership with Apple to work on some shared projects. Gates soon realized that Apple's graphics interface, which displayed text and images on the screen and was driven by a mouse, appealed to the average user more than Microsoft's text-and-keyboard-driven MS-DOS system.

He launched an ad campaign claiming that Microsoft was developing an operating system that would use a graphic interface similar to Apple's products. Called "Windows," it would be compatible with all MS-DOS system software. The announcement was a bluff—Microsoft had no such program under development—but it was sheer genius as a marketing tactic: It would encourage people using MS-DOS to wait for new Windows software releases instead of changing to another system, such as Apple's Macintosh.



 Bill Gates in 1985, the year the first Windows operating system was launched. Deborah Feingold / Corbis Historical / Getty Images

In November 1985, nearly two years after his announcement, Gates and Microsoft launched Windows. Then, in 1989, Microsoft launched Microsoft Office, which bundled office applications such as Microsoft Word and Excel into one system.

Perils of Success

All the while, Gates was defending Microsoft against lawsuits and Federal Trade Commission

manufacturers. Yet the innovation continued. Windows 95 was launched in 1995 and in 2001 Microsoft debuted the original Xbox gaming system. Microsoft appeared untouchable.

In 2000, Gates stepped down as Microsoft CEO and was succeeded by Harvard friend and longtime Microsoft executive Steve Ballmer. Gates assumed the new role of chief software architect. In 2008 Gates left his "daily" job at Microsoft but retained his position as board chairman until 2014, when he stepped down as chairman but retained a board seat and began serving as technology adviser.

Marriage and Family

On Jan. 1, 1994, Gates married Melinda French, who has an MBA and a bachelor's degree in computer science and met him while she was working at Microsoft. They have three children—Jennifer, Rory, and Phoebe—and live in Xanadu 2.0, a 66,000-square-foot mansion overlooking Lake Washington in Medina, Washington.

Philanthropy

Gates and his wife founded the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation with the mission of improving the quality of life for people around the world, primarily in the areas of global health and learning. Their initiatives have ranged from funding tuition for 20,000 college students to installing 47,000 computers in 11,000 libraries in all 50 states. In 2005, Bill and Melinda Gates and rock star Bono were named Time magazine persons of the year for their charitable work.



 In 2016 President Obama awarded both Bill and Melinda Gates the Presidential Medal of Freedom for their Foundation's charitable work. Chip Somodevilla / Getty Images

According to the foundation's website, in 2019, the foundation had made nearly \$65 million in grants by mid-April to recipients around the world. The foundation is led by CEO Sue Desmond-Hellmann and co-chair William H. Gates Sr., under the direction of Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett.

Legacy

Back when Bill Gates and Paul Allen announced their intention to put a computer in every home and on every desktop, most people scoffed. Until then, only the government and large corporations could afford computers. But within only a few decades, Gates and Microsoft had indeed brought computer power to the people.

Gates also has had an impact on millions of people throughout the world with his charitable efforts, especially with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and he has made large personal donations to a number of educational institutions.

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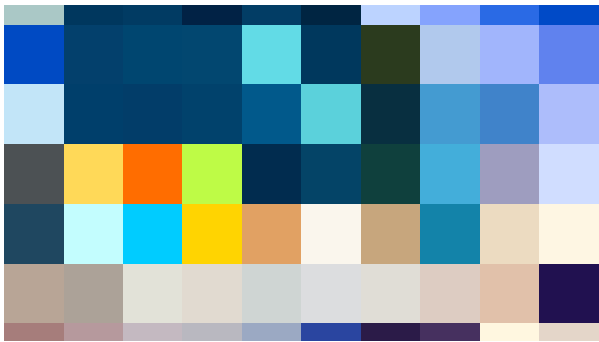
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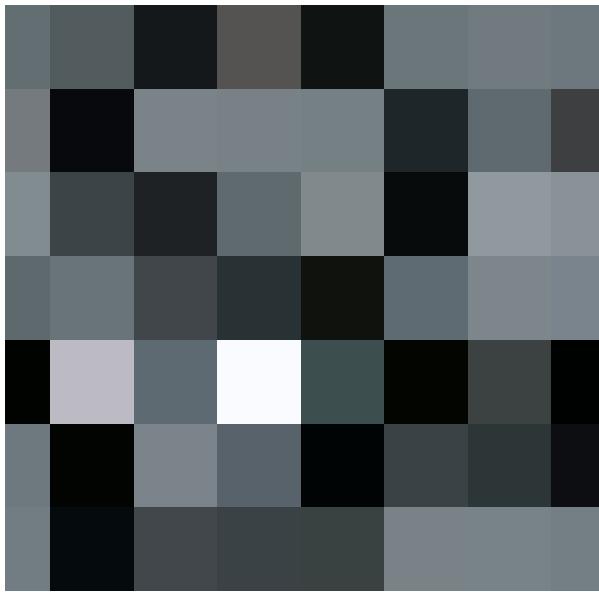
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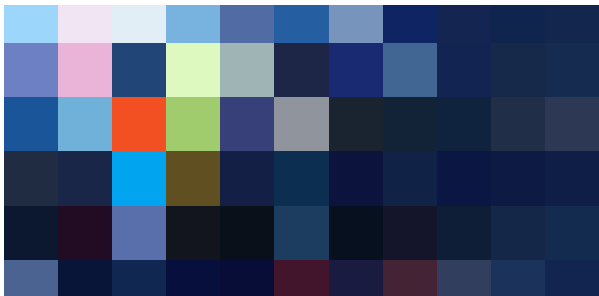
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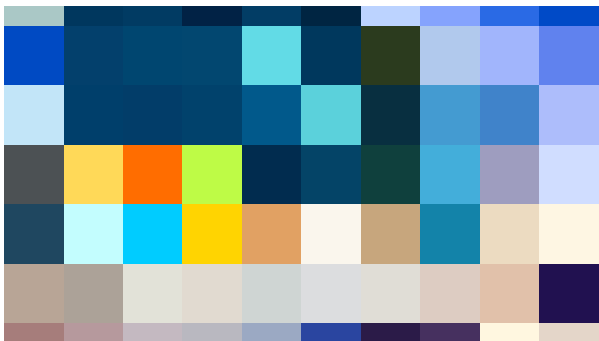
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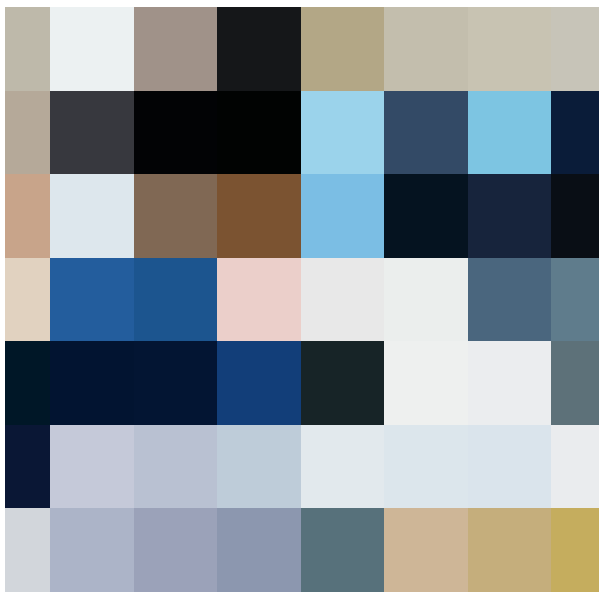
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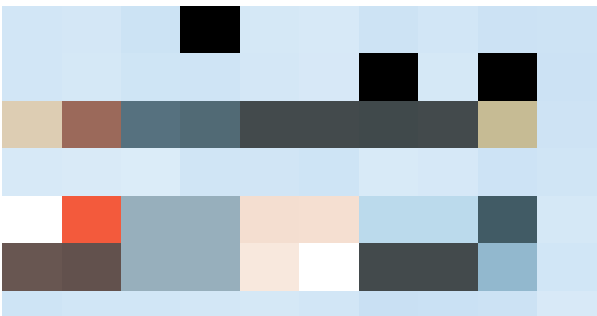
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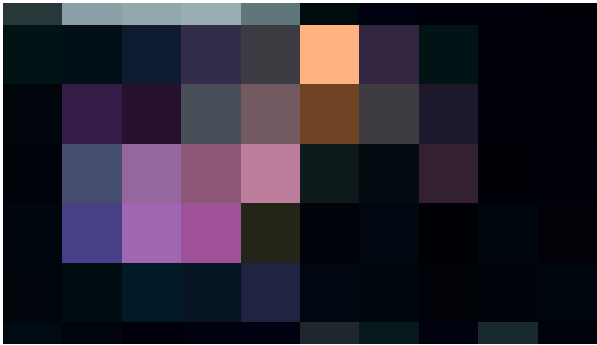
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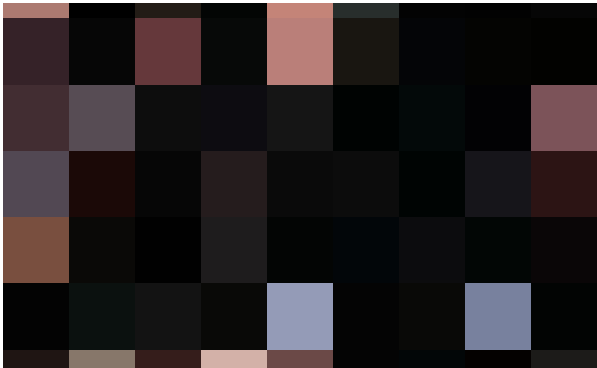
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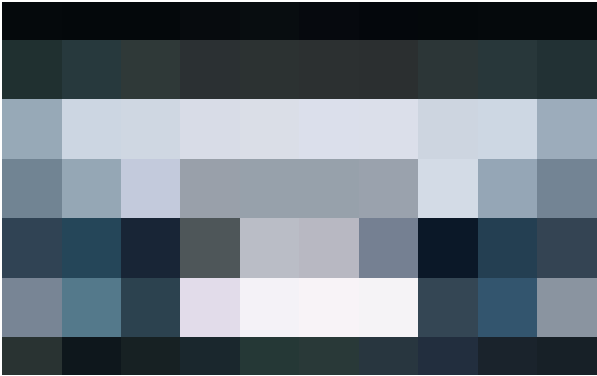
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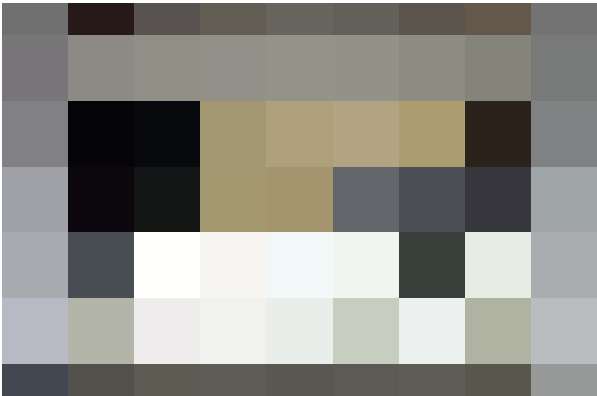
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